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ABSTRACT

The Wisconsin Rural Reading Improvement Project implements a research-based telecommunications model of professional development and school improvement that rural school districts can use when redesigning K-12 reading curriculum. The project's approach to staff development assumes that change in school reading programs proceeds via extensive reconceptualization by administrators and teachers. New concepts involve the teaching of reading as thinking; teaching reading in content areas; integrating reading, writing, and thinking throughout learning phases; and strategic reading and teaching. Participants are leadership teams (typically an elementary school principal, library-media specialist, and reading specialist or teacher) from 18 small Wisconsin school districts. Teams view in-service education programs in their schools on broadcast public television. Via narrowcast FM public radio and telephone conferencing, the project staff helps participants to use the programming to reflect on their own views of reading and in their daily classroom practices. Participants use telephone conferencing and electronic mail to share their reflections and thereby create a common working language. Evaluation of the project's first year (1987-88) documented changes in reading instruction by some participant teachers and reading specialists, accompanied by the use of new language to talk about reading as a thinking process. This report contains 11 references. (SV)

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DISTANCE EDUCATION IN ACTION: THE WISCONSIN RURAL READING IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Summary of paper read at the 4th Annual Conference on Teaching At A Distance Madison, WI. August 3rd, 1988

Dr. Margaret J. Wilsman*

BACKGROUND--The overall goal the Wisconsin Rural Reading Improvement Project is to demonstrate a research-based telecommunications model of professional development and school improvement that rural school districts can use when redesigning K-12 curriculum. The project has three strands: technology, staff development and reading curriculum change, all of which are interpreted in the context of small, rural school districts.

The project is funded for both years (1987-1989), through the North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL), which receives its funding through the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. The objective of NCREL is to learn as much as possible about school improvement in reading; and to share this information with the six other states in the NCREL region (Minnesota, Iowa, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois) and other regions.

Cooperating in the Wisconsin project are 18 districts with K-12 enrollment of 900 students or less. The participating districts are:

> Abbotsford, Alma Center, Athens, Blair, Bruce, Cornell, Edgar, Eleva-Strum, Fall Creek, Granton, Greenwood, Independence, Holcombe, Melrose-Mindoro, New Auburn, Spencer, Stratford, and Weyerhauser.

The project is co-directed by staff from the Wisconsin Public Radio and Television Networks and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. External evaluation of the project is being conducted through the Center for Educational Evaluation and Policy Research in the University of Northern Illinois' College of Education. In the first year, they conducted two formal external evaluation studies: a pre and post survey of project participants and comparison group teachers, and case studies at five of the districts. The evaluators attended and observed at project meetings, worked with the project staff to build a file of project documents, and provided formative feedback or exchange of information to the project staff. Internal evaluation and formative feedback to the evaluators is provided by the co-director from Wisconsin Public Radio and Television Networks. During the first year, some changes were made based on formative feedback. Planning for the second year particularly used the first year evaluation findings.

TECHNOLOGY PERSPECTIVE--Across America today, telecommunications technologies, are used by small, rural school districts primarily for two purposes: courses for students and teleconferences, which are short courses for administrators, teachers, maintenance staff, school board members and other involved in the district's educational programs. Secondarily, telecommunications technologies are used to provide for students and staff members, unique opportunities to communicate and network with their counterparts or experts, in distant places; and to provide inservice and graduate credit courses for teachers.

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A third and yet to be demonstrated use of telecommunications technologies is for longitudinal and mediated staff development projects in which the goal is radical curriculum change, that is, substantial and basic shifts in the the overall curriculum or in a particular content area. The Wisconsin project was funded in part because it proposed to use technologies in this third manner. The two Wisconsin agencies had cooperated in earlier projects for changing the K-12 reading curriculum via the use telecommunications technologies in the more traditional "course" and "interactive, short-term teleconference" manners. Summative evaluation research conducted by Wisconsin Public Television Network showed that these approaches were not having the expected curriculum and instruction benefits, particularly in small, rural school districts (Wilsman, 1986, 1987 & 1988).

STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND READING PERSPECTIVES--Early writings by McLaughlin (1977 & 1980) have documented the ineffectiveness of present staff development programming for bringing about K-12 curriculum changes that are substantial and lasting in nature. Building on these findings in the area of the reading curriculum was a four-year staff development study by Ogle (1986), which was conducted in one medium size, rural district. Ogle's research findings suggest some of the staff development opportunities that were best in producing radical changes in the K-12 reading curriculum, such as staff development opportunities for principals in which they learn about the new definition of reading as thinking, begin to model in classrooms the new reading behaviors, and plan with teachers for gradual introduction of new reading instruction procedures. These principal staff development activities include the more formal kinds of meetings as well as guided classroom observation.

While not all areas of the curriculum may be in need of radical change, there exists in the language arts and reading curriculum, well documented theory and research that reconceptualizes not only the over-all, long-term curriculum aims, but also the content and instructional strategies. Here the reconceptualization is of reading, writing, listening and speaking as interactive and interrelated processes. Also involved is the reconceptualization of the teaching of reading as thinking; teaching reading in the content areas; integrating reading, writing, thinking throughout the phases of learning; and strategic reading and strategic teaching. These concepts require teachers and principals to reconceptualize their understandings of reading, the role of the student, the nature of curriculum and instruction, and the role of the teacher, that is, they require teachers and principals to alter dramatically and radically, their knowledge, attitudes and behaviors. Over a decade ago the case studies of curriculum change in Great Britain and the United States, edited by Reid and Walker (1975) documented the complexity of problems related to changes that require extensive reconceptualizations by principals and teachers.

The Wisconsin project uses an approach to staff development that is grounded in the assumption that change in school reading programs proceeds via extensive reconceptualization on the part of administrators and teachers. This assumption is supported by principles of conceptual learning as well as principles of self-directed conceptual change. Such principles are explained for example, in the earlier writings of David Hunt in Conceptual Systems Change Theory and its application to education (See for example, Hunt and Sullivan, 1973) and the more recent writings of Robert Stake on naturalistic or evolutionary models of staff development (Wideen and Andrews, 1987). Hunt's work provides a description of how reconceptualization proceeds or fails to happen. Stake's piece describes the nature of staff development programming that embodies the view that change is self-directed. Stake compares programming for naturalistic change to the replacement or creationists view of staff development in which the belief is held that change can be created and does not require integration with existing structures, views, and concepts.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES--Five telecommunications technologies are being used in the project: broadcast public television (in Wisconsin their is a state public television and radio network), narrowcast FM public radio (called SCA instructional radio, a service of Wisconsin Public Broadcasting Network), narrowcast television(called ITFS and also a Network service), telephone conferencing (called WisLINE, a service of the University of Wisconsin Extension, Instructional Telecommunications Systems), and electronic mail and forums (called LEARNING LINK, another service of Wisconsin Public Broadcasting). Each district provides a color television and VHS recorder which are used to tape and playback at a later time the television programming. A special receiver was provided to each district for reception of the SCA radio programming. Some districts paid to install FM radio antenna; and some districts needed to relocate their tape recorder with a proper audio-in jack. Five districts within the 25 mile required range of the Wausau public television transmission tower that is used to distribute the ITFS programming, were provided with a microwave antenna and connecting cable. Each district received one set of telephone conferencing equipment which provided them with three speakers and a portable carrying case. Each district also received a computer modem and electronic mail software. The districts installed the phone lines for operating the telephone conferencing and electronic mail equipment.

PROGRAMMING--These technologies are not used solely in the traditional manner, which is primarily to deliver information or new instructional resources. Because of the project's concern for self-directed conceptual change, that is, use of the naturalistic model of staff development, existing programming is "repurposed" or used in another manner. This new focus is on the details of the daily practice of participants. For example, broadcast television is used to deliver two video series produced and evaluated by the Network:

> "Teaching Reading Comprehension" fourteen, thrity-minute vidoe programs for in-service education. Each reading specialist and target teacher received a copy of the 80-page viewer's guide that accompanies this series.
>
> "Storylords" twelve, fifteen-minute video programs for second through fourth graders. Again each teacher recieved a copy of the 65 page teachers guide.

Via other technologies, like SCA radio programming and WisLINE telephone conference call, the project staff helps participants to use this programming to reflect on their own daily practices in the classroom. Participants are encouraged to first view themselves a learners who primarily are concerned with monitoring their own view or definition of reading as reflected in the details of their daily practice in the classroom or outside of it, as when they themselves are reading professional pieces. Participants are discouraged from immediately seeking to implement or create new, innovative programs or implement innovative practices. This is done so that participants have an understanding of the rationale underlying the programs, in "Storylords," for example, before using the programs with students in the classroom.

Programming also is designed for the purpose of helping participants come to share a common language for describing, analyzing and reflection on daily practice. Coming to share this common language involves the building of a common culture, which according to Stake's piece cited earlier, takes place via the examination of formal theory, codified data, direct experience and vicarious experience. Telephone conferencing and electronic mail are used to promote this development of shared language, and to present direct experiences. The ITFS and public broadcast programming are used to present case studies which can be considered vicarious experiences.

DISTRICT PARTICIPATION--Each participating school district has assembled a district leadership team composed of an elementary school principal, library-media specialist and reading specialist. Because we are working in small, rural districts these team members frequently have another position.

For example, three principals are also the district's reading specialist and three are district administrators. Most reading specialists are classroom teachers or Chapter 1 teachers. Some library media specialists are teachers--we have a German teacher and a fourth-grade teacher.

During both years of the project $1,600 is allocated to each participating school district to provide for staff release time for these team members, particularly the reading specialists to learn the new view of reading and reflect on their own view as it is embedded in their daily practice.

All leadership team members are expected to learn and model reading as thinking and the new reading instruction which follows from this view of reading. In addition, each leadership team member has other roles and responsibilities. For example, besides serving as the district project coordinator, the elemtary principal is expected to use the new view of reading as thinking when planning with teachers and when observing and evaluating in their classrooms.

Each team has assembled a first group of elementary school teachers who are called target teachers. They also are expected to participate in some of the distance education activities and to learn about reading as thinking and new reading instruction. The other elementary school teachers in the district were to gain some awareness-level familiarity with this new view of reading and reading instruction by observing in the classroom of target teachers or particiapting in a less extensive program of professional development activities. Districts were encouraged to select only two to four target teachers in the first year. These teachers would provide opportunities for the leadership team members to have direct experiences needed to build a new common language and to reflect on daily practices.

FIRST YEAR LESSONS LEARNED--Many lessons were learned in the first year related to the acquisition, installation and debugging technologies; the fanaticism of some persons with technologies; and the difficulties experienced by participants who are not comfortable with using telecommunications technologies, nor familiar with reflecting closely on daily practice and sharing new language and their direct experiences, in a learning mode, with others. Most participants came to the project expecting the project staff and consultants (experts) to deliver the answers in clear, simple packages; expecting changes to come quickly--in one year and then move onto another area of the curriculum.

The external evaluation findings show that by the end of the first year, some reading specialsts, and target teachers were coming to understand that a definition of reading is reflected in one's daily practices; and that the new definition of reading entails a good deal of reconceptualization on their part. They were beginning to see themselves first a learners, a new role for many. The case studies, survey responses, and project staff observations document changes in the way some project teachers and reading specialists teach reading. These changes were accompanied by use of new language to talk about reading as thinking and new views of reading as a thinking process. There was evidence that in most sites, this new language, view of reading, and classroom practice, came to teachers from the distance learning programming supported by colleagial interaction. Teachers and reading specialists generally believe that students, particularly the less able ones, benefit from this new approach to reading as thinking.

All project participants are looking forward to a second year and are developing some insight into the longitudinal nature of changing the reading program. Two aspects of the project that will receive more attention in the second year are (l) clarifying and developing the roles and responsibilities of the three members of the district leadership team and (2) helping all participants learn more about distance learning and new ways of

distance learning programming and equipment. The internal evaluation in the second year will focus on the extent to which the programming embodies the principles of self-directed conceptual change or naturalistic views of staff development. The external evaluation will expand to include student testing. The other first year external and internal evaluation procedures will continue in the second year.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE--The rural education community seems determined to use of telecommunications technology to benefit schools. Least explored has been its use for longitudinal and naturalistic staff development and K-12 curriculum redesign. The present project should make the rural education community aware of new and future uses of telecommunications technology; and its potential cost effectiveness for these normally expensive undertakings. The present project has implications for the criteria that could be used to examine the programming delivered to students as well as teachers. That is, there are instructional design issues to attend to when discussing programming, not merely curriculum enhancement issues.

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